

The first time I saw Larry Campbell play was at a Bob Dylan concert at the bottom of a ski slope in Boalsburg, PA. Campbell had been in the band about a month and the on-line reviews were mixed at best with many complaining the new guitarist wasn't doing very much. My reaction was finally, a real lead guitar player. One who played country on the country songs and blues on the blues songs. There was no doubt in my mind that Larry Campbell had listened to and studied the great guitar players, he was a what a good guitar player should be, a walking catalog of guitar licks and riffs, and more important, he knew when to play and when not to.

That sense of when and what to play never changed during his long tenure with Bob Dylan. A band, whether a back-up band or not is a team, and above all Larry Campbell was a team player. But sometimes being a team player doesn't mean you get to do your best stuff, 'cause you're doing what's right for the team.

Now I don't know whether "Rooftops" Larry Campbell's all instrumental album is his best stuff or not, but in the more than 50 times I saw him play with Bob Dylan there were only slight glimpses of the music on this album, like when he restored the finger-picking part to "Boots of Spanish Leather" or perhaps in the latest re-arrangement of "Girl From The North Country."

"Rooftops" is the kind of album they used to make a long time ago. As Campbell points out in the liner notes, the songs are mostly fiddle tunes, many of them Irish fiddle tunes transposed to guitar. There's nothing so new in that, Doc Watson's reputation is pretty much based on that, and lots of other pickers such as Dave Bromberg followed suit. It's what you do with the songs that counts, and where the songs take the listener.

There's lots of stuff on this album to make guitar pickers want to figure the stuff out, and Campbell graciously provides the various tunings he used. On the two opening songs, "The Camp Chase" and "Black and White Rag," there's plenty of astounding moments. The latter song reminds me of Dave Van Ronk who also liked to transpose rags to guitar.

The seven-minute excursion of "House Carpenter" -- perhaps the album's tour de force shows that you don't always need the lyrics to get the story. Campbell's guitar sails several seas, each one a little different, before coming ashore only to return to sea again.

However as amazing and dexterous Campbell's picking on the fast songs may be, for the heart of this album is in the slower Irish songs,

"Margaret's Waltz," "Blind Mary" and "Death and the Sinner." Like most of the songs on "Rooftops," they take me to another time and place. "Margaret's Waltz" in particular reminds me of a record I once heard years ago of a song named "Tramps and Hawkers" by some long gone group called the Arwen Mountain String Band. About the third time I heard that record, I realized the melody was "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," and a host of other Irish songs. Either way there was something about that version of that song, the almost classical fingerpicking that touched something deep inside and that's what Campbell does on these songs.

And he sums that feeling up perfectly in his own composition, "Henderson County," which he says in the liner notes is "written in homage to the places we either go physically or in our minds that that provide refuges from the daily burdens.

And that's what "Rooftops" is. It's a refuge and a beautiful one. And it should be noted that Larry did a great job producing this. You can almost feel the wood on the guitars.